
Friends For Youth Mentoring Institute

CONNECTIONS

Spring 2007

Using Research to Improve Your Practice

When Friends for Youth began matching volunteer adults with young people in Northern California 28 years ago, the term “mentor” was known and used by few people. Today, “mentoring” is used by many different kinds of programs and services to describe various types of guiding and caring relationships. Patrick Boyle of *Youth Today* writes that the “meaning of the term has become elastic.”¹ Mentoring can be formal or informal; can be structured around goal-setting or just hanging out; or can be applied to one aspect of a relationship that may be officially called something else, like coaching. When adults think of their earliest mentors, many tend to recall favorite teachers who inspired and encouraged them, even though they were not called mentors. For the purposes of educating formal youth mentoring programs, Friends for Youth uses the definition offered by Jean Rhodes in *Stand By Me*²: a relationship between an older, more experienced adult and an unrelated, younger mentee, characterized by ongoing guidance, instruction, and encouragement provided by the adult and aimed at developing the competence and character of the mentee.

Similarly, research on mentoring was unheard of when Friends for Youth was established in 1979. *Making a Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers Big Sisters*³, published in 1995, is considered to be the first “big” study of mentoring. It is now being called the “most influential, most useful, and misused evaluation in youth work.”⁴ This study has been widely used to promote mentoring, primarily as marketing and fundraising tools, even though the structure of programs using the results may not compare. With the inability to concisely define mentoring, as noted above, it is increasingly difficult to find comparable results from studying these relationships. Most programs know, however, that it is beneficial to use the results of research to prove their point, whether they are looking to attract mentors, families, or funding. Mentoring is growing into its own field, and we are now seeing the results of more studies evaluating different program types, populations, and outcomes. It is becoming imperative for program staff, from executive directors to grantwriters to direct services coordinators, to be familiar with the research being done and its implications beyond the most-quoted study that is now 12 years old.

¹ Boyle, Patrick. (2006, June). Are You My Mentor? *Youth Today* Retrieved on April 26, 2007 from <http://www.youthtoday.org/youthtoday/June06/front2.html>

² Rhodes, Jean (2002). *Stand By Me: The Risks and Rewards of Youth Mentoring*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

³ Tierney, J., Grossman, J.B., & Resch, N. (1995, November). *Making A Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers Big Sisters*. Philadelphia, PA: Public/Private Ventures.

⁴ Boyle, Patrick. (2007, December/January). The Study that Ignited (or Diluted) Mentoring. *Youth Today*. Retrieved on April 26, 2007, from <http://www.youthtoday.org/youthtoday/Dec06/front2.html>

Friends for Youth announces our new web site! Check us out at www.friendsforyouth.org to find information about our direct mentoring services program, the Mentoring Institute activities (including a new *SAFE Mentoring* page), and new photographs of our mentors and mentees. For the past six years, Darren Ferriera, a professional photographer with the Gap, Inc., has volunteered his time and studio to create portraits of real mentors and mentees from our program. No stock photos here - they're all our own!

Three recent studies and one textbook address different aspects of mentoring. The textbook contains 36 chapters of research addressing a variety of topics from exploring the foundations to examining mentoring relationships to special populations, settings and how policy issues can impact programs. You may not read all 674 pages, but you will find something that resonates with your particular mentoring program model. All of the studies are available online; the book is available for purchase online:

Bowie, L., & Bronte-Tinkew, J. (2007, January). *Recruiting Mentors in Out-of-School Time Programs: What's Involved? Research-to-Results, 2007-05*. Washington, DC: Child Trends.
http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child_Trends-2007_01_22_RB_RecruitMentors.pdf

DuBois, D. and Karcher, M., Eds., (2005) *Handbook of Youth Mentoring*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
<http://www.sagepub.com/booksProdDesc.nav?prodId=Book226176>

Rhodes, J., & DuBois, D. (2006). *Understanding and Facilitating the Youth Mentoring Movement*. *Social Policy Report, 20(3)*. Ann Arbor, MI: Society for Research in Child Development.
<http://www.srcd.org/documents/publications/spr/spr20-3.pdf>

MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership. (2006). *Mentoring in America 2005: A Snapshot of the Current State of Mentoring*. Alexandria, VA: MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership.
<http://www.mentoring.org/leaders/files/pollreport.pdf>

Now that research is becoming more commonplace and easily available, many mentoring programs are scrambling to find the time to read and digest it, then incorporate the findings into what they are already doing. One of the biggest obstacles we hear from program staff is not having enough time to take a step back from running the program to even read a short report. If that even happens, there is never enough time to think critically about what was just read, let alone apply theoretical findings into practical applications. Turning research into practice can take considerable effort, especially if you are thinking of changing your focus, but it can also be easy to incorporate findings into what you are already doing.

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Taking a look at three different pieces of research related to mentors, here are examples of how we have used research to improve our practice.

MENTOR TRAINING

A 1999 study found that mentors who received fewer than two hours of pre-match training reported the lowest levels of relationship satisfaction, while those with six or more hours had the strongest relationships.⁵ Shortly after this report was released, Friends for Youth expanded its pre-match volunteer training from four hours to six hours, adding more in-depth material about specific skill development, more “real-life scenarios” for role plays, and more of a foundation as to what makes mentoring successful. The result? We continued to have an 88% average success rate of mentors and mentees completing their 12-month commitment. In addition, we found a subtle but definite change: program coordinators (who recruited, screened, trained, and assessed applicants, made matches, and supported them through their year) noticed a decline in the number of “counseling” requests from newer mentors after having the additional two hours of training. We felt as if mentors were more prepared to handle the beginning kinds of issues that typically come up in our program, such as a mentee not returning calls or not showing up for meetings and mentors being able to set better limits early on. These mentors continued to contact us with more serious issues that required intervention from program staff or outside resources, but they could “sweat the small stuff” on their own. We speculated that this feeling of empowerment led to a better feeling of overall satisfaction, achievement, and desire to stay committed.

⁵ Herrera, C., Sipe, L., and McClanahan, W.S. (1999). *Mentoring School-Age Children: Relationship Development in Community-Based and School-Based Programs*, Philadelphia, PA: Public/Private Ventures.

MENTOR RECRUITMENT

The Mentoring Consulting Group (www.mentorconsultinggroup.com), led by Susan Weinberger, completed a study in 2000 at the Allstate Insurance Company's mentoring program. Employees who were matched with elementary school youth reported many positive benefits for themselves, including an increase in morale, better satisfaction with their jobs, and returning to work happier. The report showed that 100% of participants also agreed that small social programs make a difference. The perfect place to turn this research into effective practice is in mentor recruitment. Friends for Youth's recruiting staff now uses this information during corporate pitches as an extra incentive for employees to become mentors. Yes, we still talk about why young people need safe and effective mentors, but the report allows us to address potential volunteers' questions of what is "in it" for them. This study, which was presented by Dr. Weinberger as a keynote speaker to the attendees at the 2006 Annual Northern California Mentoring Conference, can also persuade company executives to give their employees time off work to volunteer.

MENTOR SCREENING

Beginning in 2003, MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership and the FBI, with funding allocated from Congress, began the SafetyNet Pilot Program (<http://apps.mentoring.org/safetynet/index.adp>), allowing programs the opportunity to make nationwide FBI fingerprint-based background checks available to any mentoring program in the country. After three years of a pilot program, they published their results (i.e., research) making the case for a permanent and efficient system for obtaining fingerprint-based criminal background checks on volunteers who work with youth. While the pilot program was designed to show the need for expanding beyond an initial program, it also yielded a wealth of information to use in other ways. For example, when we train programs on the importance of volunteer screening, it can be very convincing to hear that 7.5% of applicants whose background checks were processed in the these first three years had criminal records of concern and -- even though they knew the check would be performed -- over 50% of these applicants had indicated that they did not have a criminal record. It is further convincing to hear the examples of what was found on these applicants' records: guilty twice of sexual abuse in first degree, originally charged with sodomy deviate intercourse with person under age and endangering welfare of child, convicted of battery twice and charged with possession of photo sex performance of child, and charged with willful cruelty to child possible injury/death. Had these results not been obtained, there is the possibility that these applicants could have become mentors in a structured program. Is this the kind of volunteer you want? Reminder: background checks are a vital component of an overall screening process, but programs should not rely solely on this information. For more information on recommend screening guidelines, please see our *SAFE* Mentoring page at www.friendsforyouth.org and click the links to the Mentoring Institute.

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By being involved in the mentoring community (e.g., attending trainings and conferences, receiving updates from training programs, and networking with colleagues), it is possible to continually improve your mentoring service without significant time away from the daily business of running your program. Programs are advised to implement a monthly or quarterly "retreat" to break away from normal operations and think critically about services and outcomes. With the growing amount and high quality of research now available, we can all help the field grow smarter, safer, and provide better opportunities for the children and youth we care about.

SPECIAL OPPORTUNITY TO USE RESEARCH TO IMPROVE PRACTICE: SUMMER INSTITUTE ON YOUTH MENTORING

<http://www.nwrel.org/mentoring/institute.php>

for full information and links to the downloadable application and scholarship form.

Portland State University is proud to inaugurate the Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring. The Summer Institute offers a truly distinctive educational opportunity for experienced mentoring professionals. Participants attend an intensive week-long seminar presenting the latest developments in theory and research on youth mentoring. Each day-long session is led by a prominent, nationally recognized research fellow. The aim is a series of highly interactive discussions that provide an in-depth view of the research and examine its implications for program policies and practices. Sessions include ample time for participants to think critically and creatively about their own program issues and explore opportunities for innovation. A fundamental premise of the institute is that a sustained dialogue between experienced professionals and researchers stimulates research with relevance to the field and enhances its translation to practical application.

Participants: To encourage an active exchange among professional peers and with researchers, the Summer Institute seminar is limited to 20 participants. Ideal participants are those who have several years of experience in the field of youth development and are seeking an advanced level of professional development. They are experienced professionals who hold positions enabling them to influence the training and supervision of staff, the development of program models, and the implementation of service delivery changes based on the latest advances in the field (e.g., executive directors, program directors, consultants who provide training/technical assistance). The Institute provides structure for ongoing peer networking.

Research Fellows: Research fellows are selected to serve as Summer Institute seminar instructors on the basis of their expertise. Each fellow is a nationally recognized scholar who has made an important contribution to the literature on youth mentoring. The 2007 Summer Institute focuses on the latest theory and research on mentoring in school settings. The director of the Summer Institute is Thomas Keller, the Duncan and Cindy Campbell Professor for Children, Youth, and Families with an Emphasis on Mentoring at Portland State University. Research fellows for 2007 are Timothy Cavell, Professor at University of Arkansas; Carla Herrera, Senior Researcher at Public/Private Ventures; Michael Karcher, Associate Professor at University of Texas-San Antonio; and Renee Spencer, Assistant Professor at Boston University.

Prospective participants complete a short application and provide a current resume. Space is limited to 20 participants. Participants are expected to attend the entire week-long seminar. Tuition for the seminar is \$725 (scholarships are available). There is a special rate on lodging at University Place, a full-service hotel on the Portland State University campus (www.pdx.edu/cegs/uplace.html).

Summer Institute seminar will be held July 16-20, 2007. Applications and scholarship requests are due May 1. For more information, contact Thomas Keller at kellert@pdx.edu or 503-725-8205.

 **MENTORING INSTITUTE**

Program Manager: Sarah Kremer

Website: www.friendsforyouth.org

Email: info@mentoringinstitute.org

Telephone: 650-559-0200 **Fax:** 650-368-4467

Address: 1741 Broadway, Redwood City, CA 94063

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continues to be your source for:

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- *Trainings for program staff and mentors & mentees directly*
- *Individual consultations*

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